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Stirring it Up: Faculty Professional Development in Jamaica

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Introduction

In the summer of 2003, I spent six weeks teaching in Mexico as part of a Guadalajara study abroad program, an experience that significantly changed what I saw to be the potential of post-secondary education, the importance of global perspectives in higher education curriculum, and the possibility of interdisciplinary teaching and research. That summer, I taught two courses – a race and ethnicity course largely dedicated to exploring the development of “Hispanic-American” identities and a law and society course that substantially focused on the role American legal philosophy and formal legal institutions played in facilitating manifest destiny and the annexation of what would ultimately become the western United States. The Guadalajara program was the signature study abroad opportunity at my former institution in Southern California and it welcomed about 200 student participants each year primarily from our university, but it also invited students and faculty from other colleges in the U.S. and Mexico. As an educator, I was undeniably transformed by my south of the border foray and, as someone who regrettably never studied abroad in college, I knew that this lone summer in Mexico was not going to satisfy my longing for continued international educational experiences and faculty development around globalized curriculum.

There are two significant challenges to the value of studying and teaching abroad, in my experience as both a teacher and program director. First, study abroad programs too often exist as appendages of their host institutions planted in another country where students and faculty can spend their days abroad in an American bubble without meaningfully engaging with the cultures and people of their host countries. Secondly, particularly in the case of shorter-term study abroad experiences, these programs can amount to little more than rapidly moving sight-seeing opportunities that again deny students and faculty any real connection to academic curriculum or the cultures from which they should ostensibly be gaining knowledge.

In 2006, with these concerns in mind, I began a still-running study abroad program in Jamaica, a Caribbean nation to which I have loose ancestral ties; my maternal grandmother was born a Jamaican and, throughout my childhood, she routinely hosted Jamaican relatives in her suburban Washington, D.C. home. Jamaica is also “a small place” – to borrow from Jamaica Kincaid’s memoir (1988) of the same title that takes a critical look at the post-colonial tourist economy that characterizes her native country, Antigua – whose natives, I felt, might offer an alternative perspective to the dominant narratives depicting the grand age of European exploration, colonialism, and imperialism. The philosophical foundations of this program are rooted in the belief that the independent island nations making up the Caribbean are central to a

comprehensive understanding of modern global societies, the difficulties faced by the majority of post-colonial nations in the developing world, and the privileges associated with citizenship in post-industrial “first world” societies.¹

In an effort to ensure that my students’ studies abroad connected them to Jamaica, my program colleagues and I developed an interdisciplinary curriculum with a required community service-learning (CSL) and interaction component. The CSL element involved the establishment of formal partnership with local community agencies and built-in opportunities for informal student exchanges with local community members. Service in the traditional sense is an effective tool in connecting students studying abroad to the communities in which they are located. However, my colleagues and I also felt structured but less task-oriented casual encounters and conversations were equally valuable in encouraging students to immerse themselves in local Jamaican culture. The end result was a Jamaica study abroad program designed to achieve four academic goals. First, it seeks to provide students with an overview of Caribbean society and culture from the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the present. Second, program faculty and I ask students to consider the impact European colonization had on shaping Jamaican society. Third, through meaningful interaction with Jamaican community members, students experience the day-to-day lives of people who live

¹ The link between present-day world powers and the imperial pasts that funneled massive fortunes that allowed them to establish positions of global political and economic dominance has been clearly established throughout the literature. As Martin Japtok (2000) writes in his essay exploring Caribbean history through plant life, “There might not be a region of the world that reflects the history of colonialism in its various phases in a more direct way than does the Caribbean” (Japtok 2000: 475). The use of the Caribbean as a lens to better understand global society is particularly relevant for nations like England, France, and Spain that, in spite of current economic woes tied to the global financial crisis, quite literally established their status as world powers on the backs of the Caribbean sugar industry and the African slave labor whose ancestors now comprise most of the population of the “Black Atlantic.” As Japtok also notes that the late 17th century sugar colony of Barbados was the most important colony in the British Empire generating as much wealth for Britain in trade as the tobacco colonies of Maryland and Virginia combined. Similarly, in his book *Bury the Chains*, historian Adam Hochschild (2005) notes in the late 18th century, “the value of British imports from Jamaica alone was five times that from the thirteen mainland colonies” (Hochschild 2005: 55). Finally, in his book chronicling a voyage of a French slave ship in the 18th century, Robert Harms (2002) discusses the French port city of Nantes which was described by one Parisian mapmaker as “the largest port city in Brittany...one of the most famous ports of Europe... [and] a great commercial city” (Harms 2002: 5-6). While none of the ordinary citizens of Nantes ever saw slaves, three-quarters of all slave ships sailing from France and returning a year later with goods and wealth from the French Caribbean sailed from Nantes.

and work in a region with an identity that is inextricably tied to its colonial past and a contemporary dependence upon American and European tourism and trade. Finally, the program seeks to have students gain an understanding of the mechanisms through which a cultural identity of resistance and immodest independence can be forged in spite of ideological and economic systems that continue to promote dichotomous and unequal master/servant society.

In moving toward these four primary academic goals, once again through both service-learning and multidisciplinary in-class curriculum that focuses on the Jamaican experience in particular as well as the history and culture of the Caribbean in general, the program also strives to have students develop an appreciation for the intrinsic value of Caribbean literature, music, and culture; understand how the world's most powerful nations have shaped the economies and cultures of less-powerful nations in ways that often detract from the self-determination and global competency of these less-developed nations; and to have our American students use Jamaican culture as a lens through which they can critically evaluate their racial, ethnic, gendered, national, and socioeconomic selves. Ultimately, it is the objective of this almost month-long program to have student-participants return to the United States with greater cultural competency and critical thinking abilities than when they left for Jamaica.

Curriculum Development and Program Organization

My hope was to develop a diverse curriculum and structure an array of community-based and cultural experiences around the relatively brief three to four week Jamaica program so that the student participants could return to the U.S. with a more comprehensive understanding of Caribbean life and develop a real sense of feeling connected to Jamaica. From a curricular standpoint, I chose to offer two new upper-division course options rooted in four primary academic subject areas. The first course is titled "The Black Atlantic" and it explores the development of black identity in the Caribbean, particularly how and why it has taken shape in ways similar to and different from black identity in the United States. In doing so, the course places specific emphasis on the themes of colonization, slavery, culture, and resistance in the African Diasporas. The second course, "Post Colonial Studies: Black Caribbean Literature," uses the lens of Caribbean writers and, with specific effort to incorporate the essays, plays, short stories, and poetry of Jamaican authors, students are exposed to themes of African cultural heritage, the Middle Passage, the post-slavery colonial experience, and the post colonial English speaking Caribbean experience.

Driving the structural and curricular development of this program were two shared pedagogical understandings. First, as reflected in the increasingly common mission of higher education and pedagogical research on interdisciplinary teaching abroad, college educators and administrators have

realized the need to prepare students for citizenship in a global society (Lessor et al. 1997). It is my view that a global citizen is not simply someone who has been exposed to cultures and international perspectives different from his or her own. Rather, global citizens are people who, through structured contemplation in conjunction with immersion in cultures different from their own, develop a critical understanding of how they are symbiotically related to other people in the world, even if they never come into direct contact with the vast majority of these people. While traditionally offered global perspectives have tremendous value, true global citizenship should not be limited to those international perspectives typically brought into the relational discussion that characteristically revolves around first world societies, particularly since these first world societies are directly and indirectly responsible for many of the economic, social, and political challenges faced by the developing nations left out of these conversations. Second, the Jamaica program augments the dominant study abroad paradigm that prioritizes the cultures and politics within principally European first world nations and provides an opportunity for students to explore subaltern studies from the historical and first-hand perspective of those who, in a global context, appear to hold comparatively subordinate positions.

Challenges and Reflections

My Jamaica study abroad faculty, staff, and I have certainly faced a series of challenges in both the developmental and implementation stages of our study abroad program in Jamaica. The challenge that I found most audacious was the perception that studying in Jamaica is bereft of academic merit – merely a vacation thinly veiled as an academic program. Even after seven successful years with the program, I continue to endure questions and slights from colleagues, students, parents of students, and administrators regarding the academic legitimacy of study in the Caribbean, questions they would not ask about studies abroad on “the continent.”

Beyond that and certainly more substantively, my CSL colleagues and I had a fairly good grasp of what worked in conventional local service-learning situations. The University of San Diego – where this Jamaica program began and is still run in partnership with – has a nationally recognized Center for Community Service-Learning with CSL professionals who rely upon empirically driven practices and their own service experiences to develop effective course-based service-learning strategies. However, prior to the 2006 launch of the Jamaica program, community service-learning had not been a fundamental or formal component of the university’s international program offerings. Accordingly, there was a good bit of “trial by fire” in establishing a significant service-learning component in the Caribbean, particularly during the first year of the program. Similarly, we also experienced some difficulties in building

meaningful relationships with local Jamaicans over the course of a short-term international service-learning program. And, as Smith-Paríolá and Gòkè-Paríolá (2006) noted of their service-learning program also based in Jamaica, a basic concern with any short-term international service-learning program is that it could end up reinforcing and intensifying, rather than challenging, ethnocentric views students pack with them when traveling abroad. I think this is a particularly acute challenge for programs that bring students to the Caribbean. Mythologies, like that of the care-free “yah mon” Jamaican are routinely reinforced by the cultural distortions packaged in tourism marketing as well as in the first-hand experiences of people who have traveled to Caribbean but have never experienced “the gully side” or, more simply, the everyday lives of people on the other side of the tourist coin.

An additional challenge faced by all academic programs, at home or abroad, is student reluctance to shift out of the “passive learner” role that typifies most classroom-based instruction. In order for students to take more ownership of their educational experiences, it is important that they shift into a more “active learner” role in which they intellectually grow through meaningful discussion and interaction. This challenge is particularly sharp when students are immersed in an international environment where class, race, language, and cultural differences may cause them to feel intimidated and withdraw. We certainly experience some of this in the Jamaica program and try early on in each summer session to break down these barriers through less intimidating children-based CSL outposts² and incorporating Jamaican friends of our program into early-stage activities.

A final noteworthy challenge to faculty and curricular development in Caribbean and other international settings revolves specifically around efforts to explore the tensions of learning about Jamaica’s post-colonial existence and struggle for dignity through meaningful interactions with Jamaicans. The Jamaica program faculty and staff encourage students to actively consider through respectful and evocative conversation with Jamaican people what it would be like to live a post-colonial existence in which life choices were fairly limited to careers or jobs in the service sector, specifically that economic sector that caters to predominantly white American and European tourists. However, this ambition poses several challenges. On the one hand, we do not wish our students to “talk down” to the local Jamaicans or present airs of superiority. Further, getting people whose lives are inextricably tied to tourism dollars to speak candidly about their

² Over the past seven years, we have cultivated formal community partnerships with youth-based agencies including the Duncans All-Age School serving children from first grade through eighth grade; the Stephen James Basic School serving pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children; and the Granville Place of Safety, a residential facility that provides services for primarily teenage girls with no home-placement alternatives.

existence to people who, at the end of the day and in spite of their student status, are still tourists can be difficult. And finally, since our ambition is for our students to develop constructive critiques of post-colonial socioeconomic arrangements, we did not want them to withdraw into resentment or despair.

In Conclusion

Despite many of the challenges that come with international faculty-led programs abroad, there remains the tremendous potential for transformative experiences that stimulate student and faculty development. By offering students largely unimpeded access to our local Jamaican community, and likewise, offering this community access to program students and staff, we have worked with some good measure of success to codify authentic interactions that make for deeper, more meaningful relationships. When reflected upon, these very personal, genuine experiences enable student participants to expand their capacity to challenge their perceptions and reconsider their realities. As a faculty member, working and teaching abroad has not only intensified my appreciation for multidisciplinary instruction and the transformative potential for curriculum-based community service-learning, but it has also led to several unforeseen interdisciplinary research opportunities. For example, as a Sociologist, I have had an opportunity to work with a Marine Biologist and a Chemist to explore the impact of tourist development on both the physical and social environments of Jamaica. I am also currently working with two colleagues from English departments on an oral histories project capturing the experiences of adolescent Jamaican girls whose families can no longer care for them and are therefore wards of the state. We have also developed a January service-immersion trip in which students from the U.S. visit Jamaica for no academic credit solely to work on community projects and to bring resources to Duncans, the local Jamaican community that has given us so much.

Ultimately, while I have encountered several obstacles both at home and abroad, my Jamaica study abroad experience has largely been a success story. At the end of each year's program, student participants complete instructor and program surveys. To date, over 160 of these evaluations have been collected documenting the impact that the curriculum combined with the Jamaican multidisciplinary international service-learning experience had on our student participants, and they have been outstanding. Students uniformly make comments like "This class was an amazing experience" and "This course challenged me emotionally. It also opened my eyes to issues that need to be looked at on a more macro-level. My perspectives have been challenged and changed." Beyond this admittedly gratifying feedback, the lasting friendships, partnerships, and mutually empathetic relationships that we and our students have formed with the people of Jamaica have shown me the real potential for multidisciplinary international

education and service-learning programs to greatly enhance and transform the way students and faculty see the world.

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